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TAGS: [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#)

SUBJECT: JEDDAH BOASTS FIRST MUSEUM SPECIFICALLY BUILT TO  
DOCUMENT SAUDI CULTURAL HERITAGE

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL TATIANA GFOELLER FOR  
REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d).

11. (U) SUMMARY. CG and ConOff visited the Jeddah Darah museum, home to the permanent exhibition of local artist Safeya Binzagr's artwork and her collection of Saudi cultural antiquities. From oil paintings that depict early twentieth century Saudi marriage ceremonies to lithographs that depict Bedouin camps, the museum offers the public a rare glimpse into the Saudi contemporary art movement. When asked about the inspiration for her subject matter, Ms. Binzagr replied, "My paint brush became the instrument of documenting our heritage...pictures of the traditions we have lost in our rush forward." While many other art museums in Saudi Arabia functioned at one time as an office or home, the Darah was specifically designed and built to serve as a museum. In addition to displaying artwork that catalogs Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage, the museum also boasts one of the few fine arts libraries in the Kingdom and provides public art lessons to both women and children. Literary and art lectures are held periodically, and Saudi women pursuing higher degrees in art and art history serve as "resident scholars". With Ms. Binzagr's ambitious plans to expand the museum's educational and public outreach efforts, the museum has the potential to set THE example for responsible and progressive cultural conservation for all of Saudi Arabia. END SUMMARY.

THE FIRST OF ITS KIND

12. (U) CG and ConOff had the opportunity to visit the Safeya Binzagr Darah museum in Jeddah. The museum is the site for the permanent exhibition of local artist Safeya Binzagr's own artwork and her collection of Saudi cultural antiquities. CG and ConOff were met by Ms. Binzagr who explained the impetus behind the museum. In the early 1960s, Ms. Binzagr began painting scenes depicting traditional Saudi life. While her work had been exhibited in private homes and museums in Saudi and abroad, she wanted to build a publicly-accessible museum in which she could display all of her works in Jeddah. While other galleries in Saudi Arabia had at one time functioned as an office or home, Ms. Binzagr specifically designed the Darah to serve as a museum. The construction was completed in 1995, but the museum did not open until 2000 when it was fully equipped to collect, preserve, and exhibit her works. As Ms. Binzagr explained, "the inauguration of the Darah was a significant cultural event in Saudi because the establishment of art museums by private individuals is a rare event in the Arab World...for the first time, I could be sure that my art would be preserved in the manner it needed to be."

¶3. (C) COMMENT. While it is clear that Ms. Binzagr's primary interest in establishing the museum was to have a place to showcase her work, it became evident to CG and ConOff that she also wants to establish a precedent in Saudi Arabia. By designing and building her own museum, she hopes to encourage other Saudis to establish similar museums, thereby extending the scope of Saudi cultural preservation beyond archeology and folklore. To this end, Ms. Binzagr and her staff reach out to private Saudi businessmen from throughout the Kingdom to encourage them to make charitable donations to this and possible future museums. END COMMENT.

#### CONTEMPORARY APPROACH, ANCIENT THEME

¶4. (U) Ms. Binzagr defines her work as "Saudi contemporary art." While her artistic approach is modern and, at times, abstract in design, each of her pieces depicts some element of early Saudi social history. Oil paintings and lithographs depicting everything from a traditional women's souq in Riyadh to the experiences of a 1920s bride and groom on their wedding day hang in the museum's main gallery. There are also images of rugged fishermen going about their daily routines, traditional Arabian architecture that "is rapidly disappearing", and Bedouin men and women surviving the harsh desert without modern amenities. When asked about the inspiration for her subject matter, Ms. Binzagr replied, "My paint brush became the instrument of documenting our heritage...pictures of the traditions we have lost in our rush forward. I was determined to leave a complete record of our cultural heritage for future generations."

¶5. (C) In addition to fine art, the museum also has a rare collection of traditional Saudi women's costumes, which Ms. Binzagr has acquired through donations. Most of the gowns and head dressings were elaborate pieces used in marriage

ceremonies. COMMENT. CG noted that while some of the costumes were clearly made using traditional hand-stitching techniques, some were not. Ms. Binzagr admitted that some were actually machine-made to look "traditional", highlighting the fact that, despite her best efforts, the acquisition of "real" period-clothing from Saudi Arabia's early days is next to impossible. Saudi culture has not historically valued "artifacts", which is all the more reason why Ms. Binzagr's work is so important. END COMMENT.

#### THE MAKINGS OF AN ART INSTITUTE

¶6. (U) Above the first-story gallery is an entire floor dedicated to art education. Under the direction of Ms. Binzagr the museum conducts two art classes - one comprised of children and the other exclusively of women - and maintains one of the largest libraries in Saudi Arabia dedicated to art technique and history. She has encouraged students and supporters to donate English and Arabic art books to grow her collection. Currently, nine Saudi women pursuing higher degrees in art and art history utilize the museum's resources, including the library and fine art collection. Another dozen women have already received their higher degrees after serving as "resident scholars" in the museum. Recently, the museum has begun holding public literary and art lectures and has developed a website to increase the scope of their public outreach.

¶7. (U) The museum organizes an annual children's art competition for children and recently invited children between the ages of nine and fourteen to submit a drawing or painting on the theme of "Red Sea angel fish." Last year's theme was "traditional Arabian door architecture." The winners' art will be displayed at a local shopping mall and included in the museum's yearly calendar. According to Ms. Binzagr, more than 100 children from throughout Saudi Arabia participate every year in the competition.

¶7. (C) COMMENT. The educational portion of the museum has the look and feel of a small-scale art institute and of a center for the exploration of Saudi art history, a novel

concept in Saudi culture. With Ms. Binzagr's ambitious plans to expand the museum building, its collection, its public outreach efforts, and its studios, the museum certainly has the potential to set THE example for responsible and progressive cultural conservation for all of Saudi Arabia.  
END COMMENT.

Gfoeller